

Summer 2020 results: survey report

August 12th 2020

- At 10am on August 12th 2020, the Sixth Form Colleges Association sent a short survey to the principals of its 106 member institutions. By 3pm, the principals of 81 institutions (who between them have around 75,000 students receiving exam results this week) had responded to the survey – a response rate of 78%. The aim of the survey was to gauge the relationship between centre-assessed grades (submitted by colleges based on teachers’ professional judgement) and calculated grades (the actual grades that students will receive this week). A question was also included on mock exams given the government’s last minute decision to include a “valid” mock result as part of the exam appeals process.
- But a further, striking, finding that was picked up through the qualitative response to the first survey question was the number of colleges reporting that their calculated grades were below, and in many cases dramatically below, their historic exam performance. Taken together, this suggests that the process for calculating grades this year in the absence of exams, has failed to ensure performance is broadly in line with results over the previous three years – a key objective of this year’s process.

Answers	Responses	% of total
Calculated grades are much higher than centre-assessed grades	0	0%
Calculated grades are higher than centre-assessed grades	0	0%
Calculated grades are in line with centre-assessed grades	3	3.6%
Calculated grades are lower than centre-assessed grades	39	47%
Calculated grades are much lower than centre-assessed grades	41	49.4%

Table 1: Overall, which of the following best describes the calculated grades that you received today? (Base 83)

- As Table 1 indicates, just 3 respondents (3.6%) reported that their calculated grades were in line with their centre assessed grades. As teachers can sometimes over-predict the grades of their students, we expected some colleges to report that their calculated grades were lower. But we did not expect 96% to experience this, with more than half of these principals indicating that their calculated grades were ‘much lower’ than their centre assessed grades. Principals expressed surprise and frustration at this:

“We have a total of 66% of centre assessed grades downgraded by one grade or more, some by as much as 3 grades! I’m lost for words as to this outcome and devastated for our staff and students who worked so diligently in hugely challenging times”

“As a college that followed the CAG process absolutely to the letter, I cannot see any rationale for this adjustment; the grades we submitted were absolutely in line with the average of the last 3

years, at the centre level and at each subject level. Despite this, they have been adjusted downwards and are now significantly lower than at any point in the past 5 years”

“Our calculated grades are also lower than our three year average of actual grades with more students being awarded a U grade at A Level than we have ever known before. This is a huge injustice to students and cannot be accepted”

- The comments above point to an even more troubling finding – that calculated grades bear little or no resemblance to performance in previous years. This was reported by over a third of respondents to the survey (even though there was no specific question on this) and has also featured heavily on our online membership hub throughout today. Further examples are set out below:

“Moderation has been far too harsh - bringing results lower than any of the previous 3 years despite this cohort being strongest yet (on paper and in terms of predicted grades)”

“We deliver over 30 different A level subjects, and we are below the three year average by some distance in every single one”

“We would appear to be below our historic data both at centre and in some cases subject level and making this year’s set of results the College’s worst results in the last 15 years”

“It is looking as though BAME and pupil premium students are much more adversely affected (probably the Scottish situation, due to disadvantage). Our results are down on anything we’ve had for over a decade. We will be appealing most subjects if they don’t do something nationally”

- It is almost certain that the national picture, when it is reported this week, will indicate a slight increase in grades across England. The sixth form college sector is high-performing and inclusive. We think it unlikely that this high performance has disappeared in a single year. We think it much more likely that the process for calculating grades has failed to accurately reflect the hard work of students and teachers in our member institutions and this must be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- The survey also gauged opinion on the use of mock exams in the appeals process. As Table 2 indicates, only 56% of respondents actually held mock exams for all students during 2019/20. A significant minority of students (and all students in some subjects) will not have mock grades to use as part of the appeals process. There was a broad view that the centre assessed grade (which includes performance in mock exams, where they exist) was a better measure to use.

Answers	Responses	% of total
Yes, for all	46	56.1%
Yes, for some	29	35.4%
No	7	8.5%

Table 2: Did you hold formal mock exams for final year students during this academic year?

“How on earth do you police this when papers have largely been returned to students who are likely to have binned them and every institution in the country applies a different criteria to them”

“Mock exams are a red herring, they were based on a variety of criteria even within the college”

- For more information about this survey please contact James Kewin at SFCA: james.kewin@sixthformcolleges.org